DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 411 IR 057 682

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TITLE Information Services to the Disadvantaged Person: A Challenge for Information Professionals in Thailand.
PUB DATE 1999-08-00
NOTE 7p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference. Conference Programme and Proceedings (65th, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28, 1999); see IR 057 674.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/022-132e.htm.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disadvantaged; Educational Objectives; Foreign Countries; *Information Services; Information Technology; Library Education; Library Personnel; Library Services; Postsecondary Education; Rural Areas; *Training; *User Needs (Information); *Users (Information)
IDENTIFIERS Thailand

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the provision of library and information services to disadvantaged persons in Thailand and focuses on the need to provide appropriate staff training to library staff working with these groups. The results of a number of specific projects are used as illustrative examples. The paper begins with an overview of the disadvantaged and of education for the disadvantaged in Thailand, including the Rehabilitation of the Disabled Act, passed in 1991. Information resources for and the needs of the disadvantaged are summarized. Education and training for information professionals serving the disadvantaged is then addressed, including formal training (i.e., courses taken at library schools) and informal training. A project at Mahasarakham University, called "Information Services to Rural Communities," is described, including objectives of the initial training and implementation stages. (MES)

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ED 441 411

IFLANET Search Contacts
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
Annual Conference

65th IFLA Council and General Conference

Bangkok, Thailand, August 20 - August 28, 1999

Conference Proceedings

Code Number: 022-132-E
Division Number: III
Professional Group: Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 132
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

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Information Services to the Disadvantaged Person :A Challenge for Information Professionals in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper considers the provision of library and information services to disadvantaged persons in Thailand and focuses on the need to provide appropriate staff training both formally and informally, to library staff working with these groups. The results of a number of specific projects are used as illustrative examples.

Paper

An overview of Disadvantaged Persons in Thailand

Human resources are the most valuable resources and vital elements in the development of a country. They are the resources that can be developed, and education must be utilized as the most important process in building people's knowledge, fundamental experiences, capabilities, high morals and ethics, preparedness to fight for self and community, and the ability to pursue a profession or trade. It can be therefore said that education stimulates the growth in wisdom, spiritual development, physical ability, and social awareness.

It is said that all human beings are born equal and all have rights to education, equal opportunities and participation in society. But in the real world, there are some groups of people that do not have these rights due to their physical, mental, and social conditions. These people include the elderly, the physically handicapped, prisoners, the poor and the like. All of these are labelled "Disadvantaged"

IR 057682

The term "disadvantaged", as in the ERIC database, has been defined as individuals or groups who have low status in a particular society for reasons of race, sex, ethnicity, economics, language, geographic location, environment, education, and disability. The definition is well illustrated by HRH. Princess Sirindhorn who is actively working with the disadvantaged in Thailand. According to the Princess, the disadvantaged include the hearing impaired, the deaf, people in the remote rural areas, low income families, slum dwellers in urban areas, the elderly and prisoners. She remarked that these groups of people were disadvantaged to have good quality of life like ordinary people especially in nutrition, personal hygiene, education and career opportunities.

Thailand, like other developing countries, has inevitably faced the problem of the disadvantaged. A study shows that about 400,000 Thai children aged 6-11 have no opportunities to go to school or complete elementary education and have to drop out. About 1.6 million can not go to the secondary schools and a number of disabled groups represents about .5 per cent of the whole population.

Education for the Disadvantaged

When talking about the disadvantaged, most of us would think of the disabled or handicapped persons. Thailand has been aware of this group since the outbreak of the polio virus in 1960. There were a lot of disabled children then and the first school for special education was also established at that time. Disabled people have been the hidden resource in Thai society for a long time. In 1982, the United Nations proclaimed the year 1982 the International Year of the Disabled. The disabled society in Thailand was set up at that time. Ten years later in 1992, the Disability Act took effect in Thailand.

One of the Thai government policies is to extend educational opportunities to the disadvantaged, especially disabled people. The Ministry of Education also has the policy of providing suitable and appropriate education for handicapped groups. However, in terms of education, there are various organizations involved. Some are governmental sectors, some are private, and some are non-profit organizations. The governmental organizations include The Ministry of Education in which The Division of Special Education is responsible for special needs students; The Department of General Education focuses on the deaf, the blind, and integrated education; The Department of Non-Formal Education emphasized the needs of people living in remote areas, and those who are out of formal education systems including the prisoners. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare by the Department of Skill Development and the Department of Public Welfare focus on skill development and rehabilitation of the disabled persons. The Ministry of University Affairs, by the library schools and the university libraries, provides community information services and some outreach programmes to rural communities. Reading materials, information kits, and information relevant to the people' s living conditions in each community are provided.

Private and non-profit organizations include banks, religious groups, foundations and associations. Examples of these groups are the Council of Social Welfare of Thailand, The Association of the Blind of Thailand, The Christian Foundation for the Blind in Thailand, Foundation for the Deaf of Thailand, the Redemptorist Vocational School, etc. All of these provide education and professional training.

The Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled in Pattaya is an educational institution so important in relieving the government's burden. Additionally the school plays an important role in teaching the handicapped; who are experiencing hardships in living and are missing opportunities to acquire a proper education; resulting in them remaining ignorant and being unable to engage in gainful employment; to learn useful skills. Handicapped people, who have been able to study at the school since its establishment, have been fortunate in that they are now able to develop their potential for their own benefit and that of the society.

The Rehabilitation of the Disabled Act

For many years, the disabled have been fighting for accessibility in society. The first ray of hope was when the Rehabilitation of the Disabled Act was passed in 1991 requiring both the public and private sectors to provide access to the disabled. Under the Act, a private enterprise with more than 200 employees must either hire at least one disabled person or contribute to the Disabled Rehabilitation Fund.

Another ray of hope shone in 1997 when the new constitution was promulgated. Article 55 states: The disabled or handicapped shall have the right to receive public services and other aids from the state, as provided by law.

Information resources for the Disadvantaged

Most disadvantaged groups have their own information resources. The blind have "a library for the blind" and the deaf at the deaf school have "their own library". However, some other groups especially the poor and those living in rural areas hardly have their own. They have nowhere to go due to their low social status and their geographical settlement. Although the Non-formal Education Department is responsible for these groups by setting up a public library it can only be reached by a small number of people. So they may turn to the community leaders such as the headmasters, the monks, and local school teachers for information.

Information needs of the disadvantaged

Disadvantaged persons, like ordinary people, also want to have information that responds to their interests and their daily lives such as information about careers, health and hygiene, inspiration, social welfare, and current situation. Information about know-how is highly needed. However, they find that information media is not appropriate and relevant to them. Some find that they do not have adequate education and information to make a living.

Education and training for information professionals serving the Disadvantaged

Serving the disadvantaged is not someone's task but it is everyone's. Information professionals are no exception. So to be better prepared they should either have formal or informal education/training or both.

Formal training

Formal training is generally seen as courses taken at library schools. However, after looking through the Thai library school syllabuses, it was found that only a few schools put emphasis on disadvantaged groups. The Department of Library Science at Chulalongkorn University, for instance, offers a course entitled "Library Services for Disadvantaged Groups" in an undergraduate programme while the Department of Library and Information Science at Mahasarakham University offers a course entitled " Information Services for the Disadvantaged" in a graduate programme.

These courses provide principles and methodology in providing information services for the disadvantaged groups including the elderly, prisoners, the physically handicapped, and other disadvantaged groups. It is observed that these courses are elective, which means that if students do not select these courses, they may have problems working with these groups.

I met one librarian who worked at the deaf school. I asked him how he coped with the deaf patrons. He said that he had to learn how to communicate with the deaf as well as related issues such as psychology when he started his career, which was very stressful to him. He urged that if there was a course in the library science curriculum that he could have taken

about the disadvantaged, he would have had a better understanding and be better prepared for such circumstances.

It is, therefore, recommended that the library schools take the example given as a model to develop more courses concerning information management and services for the disadvantaged groups in their formal training programme.

Informal education/training : a case of Mahasarakham University

Mahasarakham province is located in the heart of Isan or the north-eastern region of Thailand. According to studies, the quality of education in this region is the lowest of the country. The capital per head is very low, and the illiteracy rate is also high.

Isan has an area of approximately 168,857 square kilometres. Its population is about 17 million. The majority of the population earns its living by farming. Unfortunately the soil in this region is not fertilized and the rainfall is insufficient for farming.

One of Mahasarakham University missions is providing services to the community where the disadvantaged are. To fulfil the mission, the Department of Library and Information Science along with the Academic Resource Center has launched a project called "Information Services to Rural Communities. This project was started in 1981 as " A Summer Reading Programme for Children". The main purpose was to provide reading materials and to stimulate the reading habit among children living around the university campus.

The project has gradually developed and been extended to a wider range of participants particularly children and adults in the rural areas who are disadvantaged in that they do not have access to information resources such as public libraries. The only place that they may have access to is "the village reading center" in which reading materials are provided but the condition of this reading centre is not good and a number of centres is insufficient when compared with the population served. In addition, they have no opportunities to have higher education other than compulsory education. Some of them have not even finished primary education. So these are some of the reasons why the project has been carried on.

Up to now, the project is still being undertaken and served as a model for informal training of information professionals. Besides lectures and librarians participating in the project, students have also been involved. Students who run activities are either library science majors or minors. During each field trip, about 20-30 students travel to the designated communities. Local pupils and villagers are invited to participate in day long activities.

The urgency of the need to provide education and information services to rural communities necessitates an identification and development not only of a design framework for providing the services, but more importantly, a design framework for training of personnel as well. So in 1987, UNESCO provided technical and financial assistance to Mahasarakham University to implement the project. The main purpose of the contribution was to develop a model for training of personnel to promote competencies in continuing education and reading habits among children and adults in rural communities through library services.

The target groups of the project were library science students, teacher trainees, and community leaders. It was expected that the first group, after completion of their study from the university, would serve as a model to run information services to rural communities. The second group, teacher trainees, could implement methodology and techniques gained in their school environment, and the last group, community leaders, could gain confidence in providing information to their followers.

The project was conducted in two phases: initial training and implementation .

Initial training:

The objectives of this stage were;

1. to prepare effective personnel for promoting education and reading in rural areas
2. to identify effective models to promote reading habits among children and adults in rural areas
3. to prepare trainees to provide information relevant to rural living.

Upon completion of the training, it was expected that;

1. participants improved their understanding of their roles and functions as well as their contribution to the project
2. all participants gained knowledge on the nature of rural communities in north-eastern Thailand
3. participants increased their ability to conduct activities to promote continuing education among children and adults.

The procedures included lectures and discussions, small group discussions, demonstrations, and practical exercises.

Implementation:

Following the initial training workshop, pre-trained personnel, project committee and resource persons worked together to utilize the knowledge and skills acquired from the workshop. Target areas were selected, and trips to the sites of activities were made. At the sites, pre-trained personnel worked in group on specific subjects under the advisers' consultation and supervision. After the implementation, an evaluation was made.

Besides the example given above, informal training like this can be seen from most of library schools in Thailand. Depending on their settlement, they may focus on certain disadvantaged groups. Students are also key personnel who run all activities under a supervision and consultation of their advisers.

Informal training is also seen in the form of seminars and workshops. One interesting example is the seminar on Information Services to the Handicapped/Disabled organized by Rajabhat Institute Ban Somdej Chaophraya during January 8-9, 1996. Objectives of the seminar were;

1. to enable the librarians, the information specialists, the teachers, and the educators to better serve and educate handicapped clients
2. to formulate specific selection criteria that will enable the individuals to identify appropriate materials for handicapped users
3. to determine which services and education should be provided for this clientele
4. to inform the participants as to the wealth of information resources available.

This seminar was highly successful since it increased awareness among information professionals in Thailand.

A challenge and trends

Recently, the 7th Far East and South Pacific (Fespic) Games for the Disabled, held in January 1999, were a real eye-opener for the public in Thailand. They presented a golden opportunity for the Disabled to highlight both their ability to perform and their problems in society. In addition to this, the new Constitution, which focus on human resources development, equal opportunities and equities, has been approved. Also, the Cabinet has approved the proposal to make this year the Year of Education for the Disabled and set up a committee to develop

education for them. The government has planned to provide 12 years of education to all disabled people by the year 2002. The government is acting on the requirement of Articles 43 and 335 of the Constitution to provide services to the disabled and on Thailand's ratification of the UN Treaty on the Disabled.

The advancement of information technology is another challenge for Thai information professionals in providing information services for the disadvantaged. New devices are being developed for certain disadvantaged groups, especially for the blind, the deaf, and the physically handicapped. The blind can get access to the Internet. CAI using sign language on various subjects is being developed for the deaf or hearing impaired groups.

Due to these changes, teachers, educators, librarians, and information specialists are expected to educate and provide services to all individuals, regardless of their physical and/or mental condition. This population has been overlooked by professionals due in part to lack of training as to their special needs and abilities for too many years.

Conclusion

A new dimension which will encourage the disadvantaged to be more self-reliant and will provide them with more opportunities for self-development needs to be formulated. The question is who will do this task. The answer is not yet clearly answered. It is inevitable that information professionals should take this matter forward and ensure that it happens. But we should not work alone. Co-operation among professionals should be established nationally and internationally

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Latest Revision: *June 2, 1999*

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